



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

March 1, 2019

I am Michael Criss First Selectman from the Town of Harwinton and a member of the Region 10 School District with Burlington. Thank you for allowing me to testify before you today in opposition to the following proposed bills:

- SB-457, *An Act Concerning the Size of School Districts*
- SB-738, *An Act Concerning the Creation of Regional School Districts*
- SB-874, *An Act Concerning Education Initiatives and Services in Connecticut*
- HB-7150, *An Act Implementing The Governor's Budget Rec. Concerning Education*

I have been First Selectmen for 8 years and I sat on the Board of Selectmen for 2 years. I have a combined 10 years of experience in dealing with municipal budgets. I have direct experience in making effective and efficient regional school district budgets.

As a community we have regionalized numerous town services. Examples include: Animal Control, Highway Equipment, SRO programs, Youth Services and many more. We have done all of this on our own. We have not asked for any help from the State and we have encountered little interference from the State. This is largely because we have been allowed to focus on regionalizing services and identifying efficiencies in a way that addresses the unique needs of our communities and ultimately costs less.

My personal experience and history demonstrates that I fully support regionalization where and when it makes sense for a community. Regionalization must take into account the needs and differences of many different groups in our communities, including but not limited to the needs of the students, parents/guardians, staff and local property taxpayers. However, I do not support regionalization when it is simply shifts a mismanaged fiscal responsibility or operational inefficiencies from the State or the distressed school systems onto communities and tax payers that have nothing to do with their failure or lack of efficiencies. Furthermore, the State Board of education already determined that forced regionalization has no significant financial savings.

I further do not agree with any effort to make classroom sizes so large that it lowers the graduation rate, bus routes so long our children suffer academically and significantly increasing transportation costs and operating costs where our small communities are already maxed out.

As a small-town leader we make yearly sacrifices in order to keep our residents in their homes with their children, provide efficient and effective education opportunities, and keep as much of their money in their pockets, provide services, invest in our community and enact controls on spending. When we have to collect the State's money do we ask for the State to curb our expenses? No. So why ask us to save other communities and the State further enabling their bad behavior?



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

We do not need more government and more studies. We agree, regionalism works, we are happy to provide best practices, examples and guidance as resources to distressed communities and the State based on our experience in the town of Harwinton and the Region 10 School District.

The State continues to take a one size fits all approach and whenever that happens, all municipalities suffer because the State forces us to subsidize its inefficiencies and fiscal mismanagement.

Every community has dedicated residents that have made a choice as to where they want to raise a family and where they want to work based on certain requirements such as affordability, good school systems, commute time and services. State mandated consolidation and regionalization is an overreach and will make it difficult for towns like Harwinton and all of those in the Region 10 School District to continue providing current services because the one size fits all approach will force efficient towns to subsidize inefficiencies in other towns and the fiscal mismanagement of the State.

I'm asking that the State legislature take a step back, take a deep breath and work on these important issues in a way that does not shift the State's responsibilities to us. If a commission is to be created it should have equal representation from small communities already regionalized and successful.

Furthermore, we ask that the Committee include language that would provide towns and cities with direct access and the ability to participate in collective bargaining pertaining to teacher compensation. Currently, municipalities are not represented or under-represented in the process and we believe that direct involvement is paramount to ensure adequate containment of cost in the out years. Passing the Teacher's pensions onto municipalities unfairly pits one town against the other and is nothing more than taxation without representation.

Thank you again for reading and listening to my testimony and providing me the opportunity today. I am available anytime to assist and discuss these concerns further at your convenience.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael R. Criss  
First Selectman  
Town of Harwinton  
(860)485-2916





## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

**Michael R. Criss**  
**First Selectman**  
**Town of Harwinton**  
**Before the Education Committee**  
**March 1, 2019**

**Re: OPPOSE - SB-457 – AN ACT CONCERNING SCHOOL DISTRICT SIZE.**

The bill requires small school districts serving fewer than 2,000 students to consolidate, without any consideration of how this will impact costs or students.

This bill uses an arbitrary student population threshold and suggests that all small school districts are inefficient.

As First Selectman of Harwinton, I have been working to improve the efficiency of our local government and be more responsive to our residents and businesses. Like many towns, we are struggling to find ways to reduce municipal costs to address concerns with flat or declining revenues and reductions in state aid to municipalities.

To reduce costs, we have adopted shared services and regional approaches that make sense, save money, and allow us to continue to meet the needs of residents and local businesses. But what we have found is that, oftentimes, regional/shared services programs do not achieve cost savings. We have to examine these approaches on a case-by-case basis.

There are a lot of studies being cited from other states. But lawmakers only need to look at feasibility studies that have been undertaken by towns interested in regionalizing to see how difficult it can be and the wide range of factors that must be considered in determining whether regionalization is cost-effective and workable.

As rural communities, towns in the Northwest Hills cover a large geographic area. Logistically, consolidating school districts may result in students traveling an hour or more to attend school and participate in after school activities. Consolidation may require new school buildings that are located more centrally, which would require extensive start-up costs.



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

If improving educational efficiencies is the goal, lawmakers should eliminate the Minimum Budget Requirement and allow towns to better control local education costs.

Please oppose SB-457.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael R. Criss  
First Selectman  
Town of Harwinton  
(860)485-2916



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

**Michael R. Criss**  
**First Selectman**  
**Town of Harwinton**  
**Before the Education Committee**  
**March 1, 2019**

**Re: OPPOSE - HB-7150 - AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE GOVERNOR'S BUDGET  
RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING EDUCATION**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in opposition to the provisions in HB-7150, which shift teachers' pension costs to towns.

As First Selectman of Harwinton, I have been working to improve the efficiency of our local government and be more responsive to our residents and businesses. Like many towns, we are struggling to find ways to reduce municipal costs to address concerns with flat or declining revenues and reductions in state aid to municipalities.

Education already comprises a significant portion of the local budget in our small towns, which places a tremendous burden on local property taxpayers. As proposed, the bill shifts at least 25% of the "normal" teachers' pension costs to towns/school boards over a three year period, and for many small towns, a lot more than the 25%.

I am concerned that this percentage would increase over the next few years as the state continues to struggle to address pension costs which included millions of dollars in unfunded pension liabilities. Towns have not had a role in making decisions about the Teachers' Retirement System and are now being asked to pick up costs because the state can't afford to meet its obligations.



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

The proposal fails to give towns any ability to negotiate changes in pension costs or contribution rates. Instead, the bill ties our hands to whatever percentage the state dictates.

Please oppose this provision.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael R. Criss  
First Selectman  
Town of Harwinton  
(860)485-2916





## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

**Michael R. Criss**  
**First Selectman**  
**Town of Harwinton**  
**Before the Education Committee**  
**March 1, 2019**

**Re: OPPOSE - SB-738, AN ACT CONCERNING THE CREATION OF REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS.**

The bill is calls for a plan that would force a massive, one-size-fits-call consolidation of school districts throughout Connecticut.

As First Selectman of Harwinton, I have been working to improve the efficiency of our local government and be more responsive to our residents and businesses. Like many towns, we are struggling to find ways to reduce municipal costs to address concerns with flat or declining revenues and reductions in state aid to municipalities.

To reduce costs, we have adopted shared services and regional approaches that make sense, save money, and allow us to continue to meet the needs of residents and local businesses. But what we have found is that, oftentimes, regional/shared services programs do not achieve cost savings. We have to examine these approaches on a case-by-case basis.

There are a lot of studies being cited from other states. But lawmakers only need to look at feasibility studies that have been undertaken by towns interested in regionalizing to see how difficult it can be and the wide range of factors that must be considered in determining whether regionalization is cost-effective and workable.

As rural communities, towns in the Northwest Hills cover a large geographic area. Logistically, consolidating school districts may result in students traveling an hour or more to attend school and participate in after school activities. Consolidation may require new school buildings that are located more centrally, which would require extensive start-up costs.



## TOWN OF HARWINTON

HARWINTON, CONNECTICUT 06791

Tele: (860) 485-9051 • Fax: (860) 485-0051

I am also concerned that, as proposed, this plan would be automatically adopted if the legislature fails to act. That cedes far too much authority to a commission of individuals that are not accountable in any way to the taxpayers of this state.

Please oppose SB-738.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael R. Criss  
First Selectman  
Town of Harwinton  
(860)485-2916